

It happened to me...

My growth needed its own WARDROBE

Twirling in a pink silk dress in the changing room, I smoothed my dyed-blonde hair, checked my red lippy. Looking good!

A retired civil servant and mum-of-one, my glamorous style had always turned heads.

But at 45, after my third divorce... 'No more men!' I'd vowed.

Now, at 70, fashion was my passion. A size 22, I lived in tailored trouser suits and swishy dresses, was always perfectly made up.

'I just wish I could afford a whole new wardrobe,'

Now I'm back on top form

I sighed, looking at the price tag. Then, getting up next day, I gasped. There was a golf-ball-size lump sticking out of my bellybutton.

'It's an umbilical hernia,' my GP explained. 'A simple op will fix it.' Phew. But it was eight months before they could fit me in.

I cringed as the lump bulged under my outfits. Yet finally, I left surgery with a smooth tummy. 'Bliss!' I beamed, hitting the shops.

But six months on... 'No!' I wailed as another hernia popped out. I had to wait an angonising eight more months for my second operation.

Then, waking up at home two days after the procedure, I nearly vomited. My sheets were sodden with a foul-smelling pus oozing from the six-inch incision.

Returning to hospital, I was rebandaged and given antibiotics

— but my tummy kept swelling and weeping. Infection made my staples burst open.

'Excess fluids keep building up,' the doctor explained, fitting tubes to drain them off.

But back home in my one-bed flat, my bulge was now the size of a football. 'I look pregnant,' I wept. 'I feel like a freak.'

Soon I'd ballooned by three stone and I couldn't even zip up half of my clothes — the rest strained painfully and were stained with pus.

'I wanted a new wardrobe, but I didn't want *this*,' I cried, trudging round the shops for size-28 sack dresses and elasticated slacks — all in miserable black.

'This is my Elephant Man wardrobe,' I hissed, too mortified to look in the changing-room mirrors. Crippled with shame,

'Infection made my staples burst open'

My tummy just kept swelling



Fluid being drained away



I turned down every dinner and bingo invitation.

Then 20 fashion-free months later, red-hot fever gripped me. 'You have MRSA,' the doctor said. I sweated and hallucinated.

Slowly, the antibiotics began to work. But it was five months before my swelling disappeared and doctors unveiled a normal-looking stomach.

I could have cartwheeled all the way home. But best of all...

'It's time for *another* new wardrobe,' I grinned, splashing out on new size-22 glad rags.

Six months on, shopping has never felt more blissful. My Elephant Man wardrobe is history. And my health — and fashion sense — are back for good!

MOIRA ROUND, 75, BIRMINGHAM, WEST MIDS

It happened to me...

The STRENGTH of a mummy

Steely determination flashed in my wife Sarah's eyes. 'I'm keeping my baby,' she said.

Married two months and expecting our first child, a blood test had shown abnormalities. The doctors feared Down's syndrome. We were both 22 and Sarah was 16 weeks gone.

'We'll love this baby regardless,' she said, refusing a termination or any other tests.

I'm a big bloke — 6ft 8in — but I could only marvel at Sarah's strength.

And she was right too. Mitchell arrived perfectly healthy. Michaela followed six years on.

Then, when Mitchell was 11, school reports labelled him disruptive. Sarah wouldn't accept it. 'He's a good lad,' she

insisted. 'There must be an explanation.'

Of course, she found it. Taking Mitchell to our GP, he was diagnosed with nystagmus — an involuntary flickering in both eyes.

Our poor boy was only being naughty in class because he couldn't read the board properly. Sarah's instinct as a mum had been proved right yet again.

But a year on, she was the one who was poorly, suffering extreme back pain. She went to hospital but no cause was found.

'I'm too busy to get sick anyway,' she grinned. But when she doubled

over with agonising stomach pains, months on, we raced to hospital again. And this time, the results of urgent tests sent a shock wave through our lives.

Sarah had cancer. 'It started

in your breasts and has spread to your bones,' the consultant said. 'I'm afraid it's incurable.'

Chemo could only buy us time. My heart cracked with pain. *If only she'd been diagnosed sooner...* But Sarah always put the kids first, herself last.

And that wasn't going to change now. 'Don't tell them I'm dying,' she instructed me. 'And I don't want to know when the end is coming. I don't want anything to stop me fighting.'

She battled through a course of painful chemo. Yet in just 18 terrifying months, death was closing in. I kept my promise. 'You're doing fine, love,' I lied.

But with Sarah finally hospitalised, it was time to be honest with Mitchell, now 14,

Sarah always put the kids first



The summer before diagnosis



'The results sent a shock wave through our lives'

and Michaela, nine. 'Mummy's dying, but we don't mention it in front of her,' I said.

They cried but were so brave, a courage inherited from Sarah.

They cuddled their mum and joked with her. There were no goodbyes as they left her bedside. Then family and I held a vigil as she slipped away that night, only 37 years old.

We cremated her to Westlife's *Flying Without Wings*. Unable to speak, I held the kids. 'How will we fly without you?' I wondered.

Nine months on, I won't let this grief flatten me. Because I'm following Sarah's incredible example and putting our kids first.

STUART BRAY, 38, LINCOLN